

R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 020 993

UD 005 990

BEAR SOMETHING AWAY.

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PUB DATE 5 JUN 66

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.52 11P.

DESCRIPTORS- *COLLEGE GRADUATES, *SOCIAL PROBLEMS,
*CITIZENSHIP RESPONSIBILITY, *CIVIL RIGHTS, SOCIAL VALUES,
SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION, MIDDLE CLASS VALUES, STUDENT
ATTITUDES,

THIS PAPER SUGGESTS THAT TODAY'S COLLEGE GRADUATES AS
RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS CAN FIGHT RACIAL AND SOCIAL INJUSTICES
WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITY AND SPHERE OF INFLUENCE. ASPECTS
OF THE GENERATION GAP AND WAYS IN WHICH TODAY'S COLLEGE
STUDENTS EXPRESS NONCONFORMITY AND DISSENT ARE ALSO
DISCUSSED. STUDENTS ARE PRAISED FOR THEIR CONCERN ABOUT
SOCIAL AND RACIAL INJUSTICE. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES, VASSAR COLLEGE, FOUGHKEEPSIE, NEW
YORK, JUNE 5, 1966. (NH)

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An Address by Harold Howe II
U.S. Commissioner of Education
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

You see before you a father who has been trying, for nearly 20 years now, to gain the undivided attention of either of his two daughters for more than five minutes at a stretch. Today I have the opportunity to seek the undivided attention of three hundred young women for 20 minutes, and the prospect leaves me both pleased and puzzled.

Pleased because I have never lost my interest in young women, whether I am related to them or not. Puzzled because it seems to me increasingly difficult for persons of one generation to dredge up from their years any useful wisdom to pass on to the following generation.

So many of the absolutes valued by my generation are being questioned today that I wonder what there remains for me to urge without sounding square, unsophisticated, or -- worst of all -- merely quaint. More than 100 years ago, the Anglican Charles Darwin began his researches into the origins of man; he found, among other things, that he could no longer accept the orthodoxies of the church in which he had been raised, and he ended his life as an agnostic.

Darwin was regarded as a threat to respectability by his Victorian contemporaries, a barbarian from the alien land of scientific observation and precise measurement. It became almost a way of life for clergymen and men of letters in those days to refute his conclusions. And yet today, we

*At commencement exercises, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, 10 a.m., June 5, 1966.

find some theologians -- men with impeccable academic credentials, men of a scholarly turn of mind -- claiming that God is dead. And we hear the mass of theologians of every denomination reply that though God is not dead, our notions of him require drastic revision. Our human nature, which seemed in 1940 to unite all men with some fundamental concepts of decency, was revealed five years later -- at Auschwitz, at Belsen, at Dachau -- to be capable of the most hideous perversions. Some of our young men today fight a war which is not quite a war, while others claim that the ancient and honorable name of patriotism has become a cheap slogan to mask the bankruptcy of a Nation's moral sense.

God, man country... these were the absolutes my classmates held when we graduated from college just before World War II. Not that young people in those days were any more noble than yours -- it was simply that these three words signified some verities which, for most of us, were beyond question. These verities of 25 years ago are much questioned today, and my generation does not find it as easy as we would wish to find the arguments that answer the new assertions of your generation.

But our answers and arguments are not the point today, and neither is the gulf between the generations which grew up on different sides of World War II and the atomic bomb. Rather than trying to inflict upon you some of my own beliefs, I feel it more pertinent to hope that you will retain after you leave college some of the faith and passion that your own generation has expressed so vividly.

I speak of that sense of personal concern for the quality of our society, and for the universal cause of mankind which has found a thousand

different voices on a hundred different campuses, from California to the Carolinas, from the Mexican border to the Canadian. Those voices, as you know, have both repudiated and applauded our national policy in Viet Nam; they have criticized university administrations, demanding more influence for the student body and more freedom for the faculties; those voices have been heard beyond the walls of the academic community, demanding faster progress toward civil rights, towards peace, toward a fair chance for the less fortunate.

And those voices are having an effect. "Nothing succeeds like excess," Oscar Wilde once said, and no matter how much the appropriate authorities deplore student radicalism, there is no question that student viewpoints are altering our universities, our social practices, and the intellectual, political, and spiritual life of our Nation.

I do not wish either to endorse or to condemn all the sit-ins, sit-outs, picketings and marchings. For from my vantage point it seems that some of the student demonstrations represent your generation's dissent from the uninteresting and perhaps unuseful orthodoxies you inherited from my generation. After all, in my day Harvard and Yale students were expressing their non-conformity by swallowing live goldfish; ten years later, students who felt the adrenalin or the hormones or whatever rises in the veins of undergraduates were seeing how many people could fit into a telephone booth and developing that new American tradition, the panty raid; today, however, student enthusiasm is directed to the great public issues of the time, rather than to trivia. To be sure, deans and public officials are frequently embarrassed because students don't always concern themselves with finding tactful means to achieve their ends.

But however much I might differ with some of the methods involved in the manifestation of what the magazines term "student unrest," I cannot help but feel that these demonstrations do testify to an individual sense of responsibility for the vast world outside the halls of ivy. And that sense, in turn, represents a great leap forward over the relatively precious and parochial interests of most undergraduates of my time.

To whatever degree each of you shares that sense of individual responsibility for the common weal, I would urge you not to lose it. And because the world beyond the academic community threatens that sense in so many beguiling ways, I would like to discuss some methods of retaining that feeling of personal involvement in national concerns and -- most important -- of putting it to work. Finally, because abstractions tempt one to be vague, I will place my remarks in the specific context of the struggle for racial equality.

I hope that by now, each of you has an informed interest in civil rights. I do not say a commitment, or a passion, or even an enthusiasm, for often it is difficult to care about a cause until it somehow touches your life.

But in point of fact, racial injustice does touch every one of our lives, whether we are aware of the contact or not. It depletes us as a Nation because it robs us of the contributions that Negro men and women could make to our common life if their abilities were given as much opportunity to mature as those of white Americans. It robs us as individuals because -- by apathy, by inaction, by an ethical sluggishness that keeps us mired in our own concerns -- we are tolerating injustice.

It is this ethical aspect of the American racial problem, rather than the economic, that has most motivated student interest, and that is a most heartening sign. The question is, what will happen to that ethical concern after you leave college and head for a job, for marriage, for a family or career or both.

Judging from the experience of the generations that have preceded yours, you will begin to lose that passion for justice which your studies, your teachers, and the college environment have encouraged in you. The often melancholy and tedious necessities of adult life do not impinge upon undergraduates with the force they will later exert. For many college graduates, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful finally take a back seat to mortgage payments, commuter schedules, and patio seminars on the best way to deal with a stubborn case of crab grass or diaper rash.

Not everything goes, of course; some residue remains of those years when daddy or the National Merit Scholarship Corporation was paying the bills, and it was possible to advocate socialism because one's tuition and board bills were promptly taken care of by a capitalist back home. Some tincture of youthful idealism survives the onslaughts of mature conformity . . . usually in a polite, cocktail-hour sympathy with the plight of depressed masses who are much more appealing because they are not trying to move into one's own neighborhood or marry one's daughter.

I suspect that this decline from the brilliance, heat, and passion of student life to the comfortable glow of genteel suburban liberalism is not only inevitable for most, but necessary. The Ghandis and the

Schweitzers are always a tiny minority. Men and women do not live by heroism alone, but by the humbler actions of earning a living, taking or being taken in marriage, and by fashioning for themselves and their descendants a slightly better life than their fathers were able to offer.

But a tepid, narrowly circumscribed, unadventurous, uncommitted existence barely deserves to be called human life in any but the most restrictive sense of that term. We ought to aspire to something more, no matter how far we fall short of realizing our intentions.

A thousand thinkers and poets, men of action and men of dreams, have offered formulations of what it is to be human. In groping among my mental souvenirs for those that made a particular impression on me, I recalled especially some lines written by a Justice of the United States Supreme Court, the younger Oliver Wendell Holmes.

"I think," said Holmes, "that as life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived."

". . . being judged not to have lived." What a heavy sentence to have pronounced upon one's days, especially since the very process of life itself brings every one of us a generous measure of pain and disappointment. How additionally sorrowful it must be to reflect, at the close of one's life, that you might have turned that pain, that effort, to some account.

These are sobering and perhaps even gloomy thoughts to offer on a commencement day. The word commencement itself means a beginning, and beginnings are usually joyful events, bright with promise as a new morning

or a new year. If I could find it in myself to do so, I would encourage you to aim at the stars, to renew this tired world with your youthful enthusiasm and your high hopes . . . to echo, in short, the thunderous boosterism that has been popular with graduation speakers who take their texts from Edgar Guest and other vigorous exponents of optimistic oversimplification.

But I cannot in honesty do so, for the world simply is not holding its breath for your arrival on its well-worn doorstep. There are more than 2,500 colleges and universities in the United States, and I would guess that every one of them is launching its own corps of confident young men and women this month. Many of these graduates, it is true, have already concluded that the highest end in life is to join the million dollar insurance roundtable or get on the ladder that leads to a corporate vice-presidency . . . or to snare a man who will soon be sitting at one or climbing the other.

I wish all of them good luck. Civilization rides on the backs of the middle class, so beware of easy disdain. The status you thereby save may be your own.

But civilization quickens and squares its shoulders at the sight of those few who refuse to pick up the common cadence because they hear a different drummer. Those few, those happy few . . .

The problem is that at the age of 21, with a brand new bachelor's degree in hand, so many of us consider ourselves capable of joining that slender band who, in Stephen Spender's words, ". . . wore at their hearts

the fire's center . . . and left the vivid air signed with their honour." The grievous truth is that most of us who would stand on the ramparts of civilization must be satisfied with less.

Genius takes care of itself, and needs no urging. It needs a spot of affection now and then, some tea and sympathy, but probably more opposition than praise. So to the geniuses in this graduating class, I simply extend my homage and a polite request that you remain until this observance is formally ended, for your sudden exit right now will disturb the remainder of the proceedings.

But to the rest of you -- those who recognize that you will probably not trisect the angle or carry the serum to Bangkok or write the Great American novel -- I would like to point out that one can share the action and passion of his time without making a career of it. It is not necessary for you to build the millennium by 1970; it will be quite worthwhile if you manage to place one stone on top of another, so that the generation that follows yours -- your sons and daughters, perhaps -- will stand three inches higher when they look about to appraise their world.

This is especially true with regard to civil rights, for the great battles remaining to be fought will not be waged in Selma and Watts, Montgomery or Bogalusa. The most enduring and critical victories will have to be won in the quiet communities . . . in the pleasant neighborhoods in our cities and in the suburbs that ring those cities. The great civil rights demonstrations have made their point, and governments at every level -- Federal, State, local -- are responding with legislation designed to bring the Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation up to date. Much

remains to be done, of course, and perhaps more demonstrations will be needed to spur action. But the task of achieving genuine equality of opportunity throughout the United States will not be completed until the desirability of racial justice is accepted by the polite people, as well as the violent people.

These battles will be won by personnel managers who go beyond employing brilliant Negroes to giving mediocre Negroes the same chance for a job as mediocre whites. They will be won by mothers who look at a first-grade reader and decide that all those white faces in the illustrations do not accurately reflect the world their children live in ... and who ask the school superintendent to do something about it. They will be won by white and Negro fathers who recognize that a son's bloody nose may be simply the wholesome product of young male belligerence expressing itself at recess, rather than of a racial incident in an integrated school.

These victories will be won, in short, by the mass of white and Negro Americans who bring to the solution of our most agonizing American dilemma a combination of concern and reason. Emotion is not enough; to it must be joined wit and wisdom and a controlled indignation about continuing injustice. Both indignation and a sense of injustice are difficult to keep lively and under control at the same time. My dentist told me recently that he had a new anaesthetic. After taking it, you still feel the pain but it doesn't bother you. On social issues like civil rights, it is important both to feel the pain and to have it bother you.

On such social issues, I urge you to reject anaesthetics and to preserve that sensitivity to the pain of others which seems to bother your college generation so much. More to the point, put that pain to work, and let it guide you to a mature, intelligent, and vigorous citizenship.

The great deeds of the world are usually performed by those who have sacrificed everything else to a few burning desires. We need such people, and we always shall. Unfortunately, the very brilliance of their achievement often convinces the rest of us that anything less than brilliance is not worth our effort.

In this day, in this America, we need quiet heroes who -- while going about their nine-to-five business -- take time to shape a slightly different world than the one they found. We need suburbanites whose concerns do not stop at the city limits, who recognize that poverty in the inner city diminishes the quality of their own lives. We need parents who will extend their concern for their own children to the children of other parents who cannot struggle effectively against economic or social discrimination. We need men and women who realize that equal opportunity throughout American life will emerge not from the organized civil rights movement alone, but also from the words and deeds of unorganized citizens whose only banner is an invisible commitment to justice for all.

I hope you will never forget the ideas and the ideals that four fortunate years in a genuinely excellent college have fostered in you, for you owe your families, your professors, and your society some

recompense for the privilege of attending Vassar. I hope that you will make the action and passion of the American fight for racial equality a part of your lives, whether those lives take you into the Peace Corps or the PTA. I hope that you will conclude, as Dylan Thomas did, that no one should "go gentle into that good night."

"The violent bear it away," says the Bible. Temper your violence as you must, for life is a tempering process. But do not abandon your young violence entirely, and make sure that you bear something away.

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